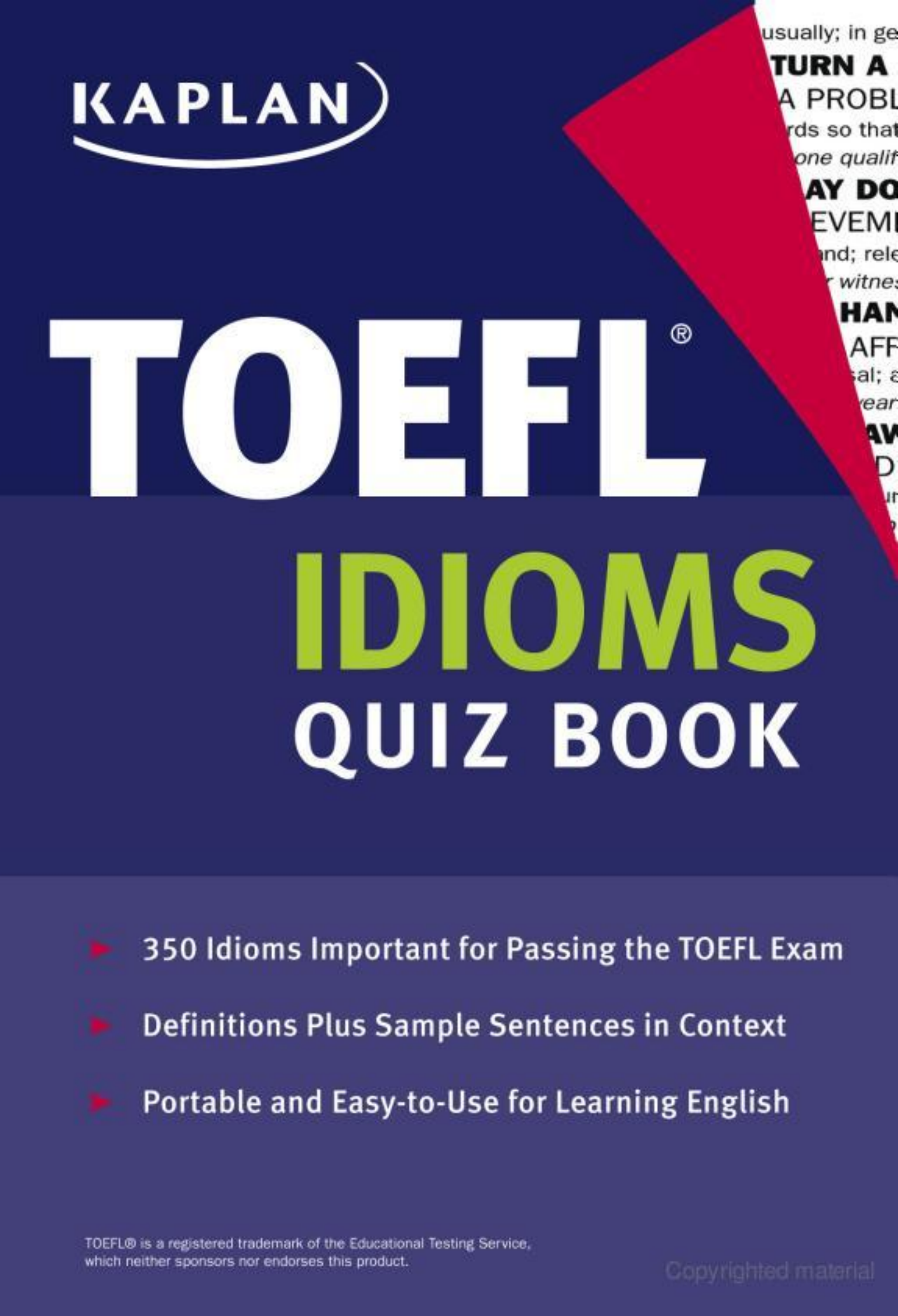
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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a standardized test designed to measure your ability to understand and use English as it is used in a North American university setting. Recent changes to the TOEFL have shifted the focus from how much you know *about* English to how well you comprehend, speak, and write English.

Whether you are taking TOEFL iBT, TOEFL CBT, or TOEFL Pencil-and-Paper, Kaplan's *TOEFL Idioms Quiz Book* is perfectly designed to help you learn over 350 idioms frequently used in English.

An idiom is a word or phrase that has a special meaning apart from its literal translation—it is usually a metaphor. Only people who are good at speaking English will know what an idiom means. Idioms can be difficult to learn, and they require time and patience to master well.

With this book, read the idiom on the front of the page to determine whether you know it; on the reverse side, its definition and a sample sentence are offered to be sure that you understand its correct usage.

Once you have mastered a particular idiom, clip or fold back the corner of the flashcard so that you can skip over it to get to the words you still need to study.

The words are organized according to their part of speech. In some cases, two parts of speech are common, and we have noted these cases with more illustrative examples.

You will also see some notes in square brackets [ ]. This provides additional information about the origins of the idiom that should make it easier to memorize.

In some cases—mainly with verb phrases—some words are interchangeable. In such situations, we have provided two example sentences, one for each version, The most common version appears on the first page.

Study the idioms in any order and start on any page.

Good luck!

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Copyrighted material

to push the envelope
verb

to abide by the rules
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to do something new and different that goes beyond what was previously thought to be possible; to innovate
*His new website really **pushes the envelope** of what the Internet can be used for.*

verb
to accept and follow (a law, ruling, etc.); to comply with
*Both companies claim the right to sell the product, but they will **abide by** the judge's decision.*

Copyrighted material

to carry on doing something
verb

to test the waters
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to continue
*The book was so interesting he **carried on** reading it after the end of study hall.*
*They will **carry on** with the dance lessons until they master the tango.*

verb
to check the likelihood of success before proceeding
*Before announcing their new initiative, the politicians **tested the waters** by conducting polls on the likely public response.*

Copyrighted material

to pan out
verb

to account for a discrepancy
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to yield good results; to turn out well
He has had several job interviews but nothing has ***panned out*** *yet.*
[from *to pan for gold:* to attempt to extract gold from a river]

• • • •

to give away the ending
verb

to follow suit
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to reveal (information that was supposed to be kept secret)
The party was supposed to be a surprise, but my little sister ***gave it away****.*

verb
to do the same; to follow the example set by someone else
He decided to skip the tournament and the rest of the team followed suit.
[a reference to card games in which all players must play a card of the same suit as the one led by the first player]

Copyrighted material

to grow out of something
verb

to back up data
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
1. to become too large for (something); to outgrow; 2. to develop on the basis of (something)
*She gives her son's clothes to charity when he **grows out of** them.*
*This book **grew out of** a series of lectures I gave last year.*

• • • •

to know the ropes
verb

to back someone **into a corner**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to understand how things are done in a particular place
*To succeed in a new job, ask someone who really **knows the ropes** to train you.*
*Hence **to show someone the ropes** means 'to show someone how things are done.'*
[A reference to old-fashioned sailing ships, which had complicated ropes and riggings]

verb
to put (someone or oneself) into a position where there is no way out and no room to maneuver
*His political opponents tried to **back** him **into a corner**, so that any position he took would cause him to lose support.*
*She has **painted** herself **into a corner** by setting the standards so high that no one – including her – can meet them.*

Copyrighted material

to have second thoughts
verb

to look after a child
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to reconsider
*After I saw the reading list, I **had second thoughts** about taking the class.*

verb
to take care of
*She **looks after** her little brother after school every day.*

Copyrighted material

to look forward to an event
verb

to look into a suspicious incident
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to anticipate (something) with pleasure
*I'm **looking forward to** the concert next week.*

verb
to investigate; to seek information about
*We are **looking into** buying a camper for our summer trip.*

Copyrighted material

to keep one's options open
verb

to bring the facts **home** to her
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to avoid doing anything that might rule out a future course of action
*He will probably matriculate to State University, but he's **keeping his options open** until he has gotten a response from all of the schools he applied to.*

• • • •

to bring new information **to light**
verb

to see the light
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to reveal; to uncover
*Their study **brought to light** some long-forgotten manuscripts.*

verb
to finally realize something after serious consideration
*I thought he would never agree with me, but eventually he **saw the light**.*

Copyrighted material

to look up
verb

to look something **up**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to show signs of improvement
*She had more tests done and the doctors say her health is **looking up**.*

verb
to seek information about (something) in a reference work
*I **looked up** the words I didn't know in a dictionary.*

Copyrighted material

to look up to someone
verb

to give someone **free rein**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to have respect and admiration for (someone)
*He had always **looked up to** his uncle, who was a teacher.*

• • • •

to rein someone **in**
verb

to give her story **the benefit of the doubt**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to control (someone's) behavior closely
*Whenever he began to stray from the task our supervisor **reined** him **in**.*
See to give someone free rein.

verb
to assume that (a person or statement) is truthful until proven otherwise
*His alibi is suspicious, but let's **give** him **the benefit of the doubt** until we know more.*

Copyrighted material

to hold one's own
verb

to hold one's tongue
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to perform reasonably well in a challenging situation
The other runners in the race are much more experienced, but ***he is holding his own*** *and will probably finish right in the middle.*

verb
to stay silent; to refrain from speaking
She was upset and wanted to say something, but she ***held her tongue****.*

Copyrighted material

to bring something to **mind**
verb

to set the record straight
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to be reminiscent of (something); to remind
*This dish **brings to mind** a meal I once had in Paris.*

verb
to correct a false story; to provide accurate information
*The media initially reported that the escaped animal was a tiger, but zoo officials **set the record straight**, announcing that it was a harmless kangaroo.*

Copyrighted material

to use up a resource
verb

to size up the competition
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to consume (something) completely
I couldn't brush my teeth this morning because my brother had ***used up*** *the toothpaste.*

verb
to evaluate or assess
The dogs growled and walked in a circle, ***sizing*** *each other* ***up****.*

Copyrighted material

to have one's hands tied
verb

to lower the bar
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to be restricted; to be prevented from doing something
*I wish I could give you more information, but **my hands are tied**.*
*The government was unable to respond quickly because **its hands were tied** by regulations.*

verb
to reduce standards so that it is easier to succeed
*When no one qualified under the original criteria, the admissions committee **lowered the bar**.*

Copyrighted material

to flare up
verb

to ask after someone
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to erupt or break out; to recur
My doctor had said the rash on my knee was cured, but it ***flared up*** *again.*

• • • •

to hold sway
verb

to go through with it
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to dominate; to have great influence
*The Dutch **held sway** in New York until 1664, when the English took control.*

verb
to perform (an action) as planned; to carry out
*We **went through with** our plan to have a picnic in spite of the rain.*

Copyrighted material

to end up
verb

to lay claim to property
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to come eventually to a particular situation or place
*It **ended up** costing much more than we expected.*
*After walking for hours, they **ended up** in the same place where they started.*

verb
to assert that one has the right to (something); to claim ownership of
*My sister always **laid claim** to the top bunk bed, so I was stuck on the bottom.*

Copyrighted material

to cross one's mind
verb

to hold on to shares in the company
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to occur to one
I'm so accustomed to flying that the possibility of driving home never ***crossed my mind****.*

verb
to keep or retain
He considered selling his motorcycle, but he decided to ***hold on to*** *it.*

Copyrighted material

to hold out
verb

to leave no stone unturned
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to resist or endure in a challenging situation
*Her doctor advised her to give up meat, and she **held out** for six months before giving in to temptation.*

verb
to look everywhere; to attempt everything
*We **left no stone unturned** in our search for the city's best hot dog.*

Copyrighted material

to cross paths
verb

to run into someone
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to meet by chance
*They **crossed paths** in Italy when they both happened to be vacationing there.*
*He **crossed paths** with my sister in college.*

verb
to meet (someone) by chance
*I hadn't seen him in months, but I **ran into** him at the supermarket last week.*

Copyrighted material

to have one's work cut out for
verb

to get one's act together
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to have a lot of work to do in order to accomplish something
If she wants to finish this drawing before the art fair ***she has her work cut out for her****.*

verb
to prepare oneself to accomplish something; to get organized
We need to ***get our act together*** *if we're going to finish this by Friday.*

Copyrighted material

to drop by
verb

to drop in on someone
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to make a short, usually unannounced, visit
*He **dropped by** for a few minutes last night.*

verb
to make a short, usually unannounced, visit to (a person)
*On the way home we **dropped in on** my grandmother to see how she was doing.*

Copyrighted material

to have one's hands full
verb

to go wrong
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to be very busy; to have a lot to do
*She has **had her hands full** lately, so she probably won't be able to help you.*

verb
to cause a failure; to go amiss
*The experiment failed, but scientists still aren't sure what **went wrong**.*

Copyrighted material

to err on the side of caution
verb

to rest on one's laurels
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to emphasize (a particular aspect of an issue) so that if a mistake is made it will enhance that aspect
No one knows what level of pollutants is safe for fish, so it seems best to ***err on the side of*** *conservation by stopping all pollution in the river.*

verb
to be satisfied with one's past accomplishments rather than attempting anything new
Since his highly praised first novel came out he has been ***resting on his laurels*** *and hasn't written anything new.*
[a reference to the ancient Greek tradition of crowning a person with a wreath of laurels, or bay leaves, to honor a great accomplishment]

Copyrighted material

to take one's time
verb

to tighten one's belt
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to proceed slowly; to avoid rushing
*I'm **taking my time** on this paper, since it isn't due until the end of the semester.*

verb
to take extreme measures in order to economize; to cut back
*Our funding has been cut, so we are going to have **to tighten our belts** and reduce the budget.*
[a reference to losing weight from eating less, which might cause someone to need a smaller belt]

Copyrighted material

to touch on a subject
verb

to see eye to eye
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to address (a topic) briefly
*The course will mainly cover the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but it will also **touch on** some of his contemporaries, such as Voltaire and Diderot.*

verb
to have similar opinions; to understand each other
*They have almost nothing in common, but when it comes to baseball they **see eye to eye**.*

Copyrighted material

to have a say
verb

to cherry-pick
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to have a degree of influence or power
*It is important for children to **have a say** in decisions about their activities.*
*In a democracy, citizens **have a voice** in their government.*

verb
to take only the most desirable items available from among a selection
*She sells the most cars because she **cherry-picks** the most promising customers, leaving the rest of us with the reluctant ones.*

Copyrighted material

to do someone **good**
verb

to narrow down a list
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to have a beneficial effect on (someone)
*He has seemed very stressed out lately; a vacation will **do him good**.*

verb
to reduce the number of options in (a selection)
*They started with a pool of twenty applicants, but they **narrowed** it **down** to three finalists.*

Copyrighted material

to draw a blank
verb

to do one's best
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to be unable to remember or respond
*I studied thoroughly for the test, but when I saw the first question I just **drew a blank**.*

verb
to try as hard as possible
*He didn't get a perfect score, but he **did his best**, and that is what really matters.*

Copyrighted material

to throw down the gauntlet
verb

to throw in the towel
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to issue a challenge
*The American colonists **threw down the gauntlet** to England in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence.*
[A gauntlet is a type of armored glove, which would traditionally be thrown down by a medieval knight in a challenge to an opponent. To accept the challenge, the opponent would pick up the glove; hence to take up the gauntlet means 'to accept a challenge.']

verb
to accept defeat; to surrender
*After struggling for many years with our business, we finally **threw in the towel** after realizing we needed to make major renovations.*

Copyrighted material

to throw someone **to the wolves**
verb

to fill someone **in**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to leave (someone) to face criticism or challenges alone; to abandon (someone)
*He claimed not to know anything about the scandal and **threw** his assistant **to the wolves**.*

verb
to inform (someone) fully; to give (someone) the details
*Lisa missed the meeting where that was discussed, so someone will have to **fill** her **in**.*

Copyrighted material

to fill in for someone
verb

to take someone's **place**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to replace or substitute for
*I usually work on Mondays and Fridays, but I'm **filling in for** Mark today.*

verb
to replace or substitute for (someone)
*The star of the play got sick, so the understudy **took** her **place**.*

Copyrighted material

to come to grips with a challenging concept
verb

to stay out of a dispute
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to become capable of dealing with or understanding
*Many companies still haven't **come to grips with** the new regulations.*
*It took us a long time to **get to grips with** this computer program.*

verb
to avoid getting involved in
*The United States **stayed out** of the First World War until April of 1917.*

Copyrighted material

to wear thin
verb

to speak out on a controversial issue
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to become less effective due to overuse
You claim to have forgotten your homework at least once a week, so that excuse is ***wearing thin****.*

verb
to express one's opinions openly
It was nice to hear a politician ***speak out*** *about the problems facing farmers today.*

Copyrighted material

to think up a new game
verb

to take advantage of someone or something
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to invent; to make up
*Our math teacher is always **thinking up** new ways to make sure we do our homework.*

• • • •

to carry out orders
verb

to meet someone **halfway**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to obey; to put into action
*He **carried out** your instructions perfectly; everything is the way you wanted it.*

verb
to compromise with (someone)
*We made several good offers, but he stubbornly stuck to his original price and refused to **meet us halfway**.*

Copyrighted material

to meet one's match
verb

to keep a low profile
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to find one's equal
He is a great chess player, but in you he finally ***met his match****.*

verb
to avoid getting attention or publicity
Like many celebrities, she started ***keeping a low profile*** *after she had children.*

Copyrighted material

to get a message **across**
verb

to get away with a crime
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to express
*The president's latest speech really **got across** his concern about the need for more educational funding.*

verb
to manage to escape the consequences of (an action)
*I can't believe he **got away with** cheating on that quiz.*

Copyrighted material

to think on one's feet
verb

to wash one's hands of the whole affair
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to react quickly and effectively without prior preparation
*She had to **think on her feet** when she was unexpectedly asked to lead the discussion.*

verb
to claim to no longer be responsible for or involved with (something); to dissociate oneself from
*He has **washed his hands of** the group since it participated in a controversial protest last year.*

Copyrighted material

to settle for a lower price
verb

to cast doubt on something
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to accept less than desired or expected
*He had dreamed of becoming president, but he **settled for** being mayor of a small town.*

verb
to make (something) appear doubtful or dubious
*The photos from the party **cast doubt on** his version of events.*

Copyrighted material

to make a point of doing something
verb

to make do
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to make a deliberate effort to do something
*I **make a point** of calling my grandmother once a week.*

verb
to manage without something important; to get by
*During the Second World War cooks often **made do** without rationed ingredients like chocolate and sugar.*

Copyrighted material

to make sure
verb

to make sense
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to be certain; to confirm
*Before leaving the house he **made sure** he had his keys.*

verb
to be reasonable or logical
*Her theory **makes sense**.*

Copyrighted material

to keep an eye on something
verb

to get over a setback
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to watch; to monitor
*Could you please **keep an eye on** the cake in the oven and make sure it doesn't burn?*

verb
to recover from; to bounce back from
*She is finally **getting over** her cold.*
*The team needs to **get over** today's loss and start preparing for the next game.*

Copyrighted material

to take someone's **word for it**
verb

to take a break
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to believe someone without additional evidence
*He says that he didn't take the money, and I'm **taking** his **word for it**.*

verb
to take a rest; to stop an activity temporarily
*She painted for hours at a time without **taking a break**.*

Copyrighted material

to draw the line
verb

to think better of a decision
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to set a limit about how far one is willing to go
*She is an adventurous eater, but she **draws the line** at insects.*
*I'll help you out one more time, but that is where **I draw the line**.*

verb
to decide against (doing something) after thinking about it more; to reconsider
*He had planned to take part in the prank, but he **thought better of it** and stayed home.*

Copyrighted material

to think something **over**
verb

to think twice
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to consider (something) carefully
I probably won't accept the job offer, but I am still ***thinking it over****.*

verb
to consider carefully before making a decision
If I were you, I would ***think twice*** *about buying a used car over the Internet.*
When he was invited to give a speech at his old high school, he didn't ***think twice*** *before agreeing.*

Copyrighted material

to get rid of something
verb

to get the best of someone
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to discard or eliminate
*We **got rid of** all the food in the refrigerator that was past its due date.*

verb
to defeat or outwit
*He tried to stay awake for the fireworks at midnight, but his fatigue **got the best of** him and he fell asleep before 11:00.*

Copyrighted material

to get to the bottom of a mystery
verb

to get underway
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to uncover the truth about
We reported the strange sounds coming from the house next door and the police promised ***to get to the bottom of*** *it.*

verb
to begin; to start
The annual Autumn Festival ***gets underway*** *next week.*

Copyrighted material

to mince words
verb

to jump on the bandwagon
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to avoid directly saying something which might upset or offend; to euphemize
Tell me what you really thought of my performance and don't ***mince words.***

verb
to take up an activity or idea that is suddenly very popular
The price of the stock rose quickly as investors ***jumped on the bandwagon*** *and bought shares.*
She has listened to their music for years, but now everyone is ***getting on the bandwagon.***

Copyrighted material

to make good on a promise
verb

to make off with the money
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to follow through on
*The company **made good on** its pledge to donate new computers to the school.*

verb
to take or steal (something); to abscond with
*He was caught after the party trying to **make off with** two silver vases.*

Copyrighted material

to stand for
verb

to stand up for someone
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
1. to support or advocate (a belief or principle); 2. to be an abbreviation of
*The memorial should express the ideals he **stood for** all his life: freedom and equality.*
*FBI **stands for** Federal Bureau of Investigation.*

verb
to defend; to advocate for
*She always **stood up for** her little brother when other children teased him.*

Copyrighted material

to stand out
verb

to wind down
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to be conspicuous; to attract attention
*The white flowers **stand out** against the dark background of the painting.*

verb
1. to slow down, to draw to a close; 2. to relax (said of a person)
*The wedding season hits its peak in June and starts to **wind down** in September.*
*After three days of tough hiking, we spent a day **winding down** at the beach.*

Copyrighted material

to wind up somewhere
verb

to keep at a task
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to find oneself in a place or situation; to arrive or end up
*I was as surprised as anyone when **I wound up** in the television industry.*

verb
to continue to do; to persist or persevere with
*She had trouble at first, but she **kept at** it and is now one of the best gymnasts in the state.*

Copyrighted material

to keep information **from** someone
verb

to keep from doing something
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to hide (something) from someone; to keep (something) secret from someone
*Romeo and Juliet **kept** their marriage **from** their families.*

verb
to stop oneself from doing something; to refrain from or avoid
*When she saw his new haircut she could hardly **keep from** laughing.*

Copyrighted material

to keep up with someone or something
verb

to lend a hand
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
1. to travel at the same speed as; to stay abreast of; 2. to stay informed about
*He couldn't **keep up with** the other cyclists on the hilly part of the course.*
*I try to **keep up with** the latest advances in computer science.*

verb
to help
*Local charities **lent a hand** to the effort to rebuild after the earthquake.*
*Could you please **give me a hand** with this heavy box?*

Copyrighted material

to jump to conclusions
verb

to sit around
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to form an opinion about something quickly without examining all of the facts
A good doctor looks at all of a patient's symptoms carefully before making a diagnosis rather than just ***jumping to conclusions****.*

verb
to lounge or be idle; to hang around
He used to exercise a lot, but now he just ***sits around*** *playing video games.*

Copyrighted material

to sit through a long ceremony
verb

to sit tight
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to stay to the end of (an event or performance)
*I wanted to leave the play at intermission but my parents made me **sit through** all three hours of it.*

verb
to wait patiently
*Could you just **sit tight** for a little bit longer? I'm almost ready to leave.*

Copyrighted material

to get on with an activity
verb

to take a piece of information **into account**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to continue
We need to stop wasting time and ***get on with*** *studying for the exam.*

verb
to consider; to give attention to
The theory was flawed because it didn't ***take into account*** *the importance of environmental factors.*

Copyrighted material

to show up
verb

to show someone **up**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to arrive
*She didn't **show up** at work until after 11:00 am.*

verb
to embarrass or outperform (someone)
*He **showed up** the team captain by making the most goals in last night's game.*

Copyrighted material

to split hairs
verb

to go without saying
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to make small, unimportant distinctions
*They still haven't agreed on the final wording of the contract, but they are just **splitting hairs** now; all of the important issues have been decided.*

verb
to be obvious or self-evident
*It **goes without saying** that you should wear respectful clothes to a job interview.*

Copyrighted material

to take something **in stride**
verb

to wipe something **out**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to deal with (something difficult) in a calm way, so that it does not cause disruptions
*The players **took** the insults of the opposing team **in stride** and focused on winning the game.*

verb
to destroy (something) completely
*Three years of drought **wiped out** the region's agriculture.*

Copyrighted material

to save one's breath
verb

to save face
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to refrain from saying something that is useless or unnecessary
She won't stop smoking no matter what you say; ***save your breath****.*

• • • •

to fill out a form
verb

to bide one's time
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to complete (a form)
*He has **filled out** all of his college applications.*

verb
to wait patiently
*She's living with her parents for a while, **biding her time** until she finds the right apartment.*

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to keep her **on** her **toes**
verb

to keep track of
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to force (someone) to stay alert
*Our teacher **keeps us on our toes** by asking questions throughout his lectures.*

verb
to keep a record of; to stay informed about
*She **kept track of** her expenses so that she could be reimbursed.*

Copyrighted material

to slip someone's **mind**
verb

to pave the way
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to be forgotten by someone
I was supposed to buy milk on the way home but it completely ***slipped my mind****.*

verb
to make future accomplishments possible; to prepare the way
The achievements of pioneering female scientists like Marie Curie ***paved the way*** *for later generations of women in science.*
[*Way* is an old-fashioned word for road; *paving* a road makes it easier and faster to travel on.]

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to take it easy
verb

That name is starting **to ring a bell.**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to relax; to be idle
*Last summer I worked 40 hours a week, but this year I am **taking it easy**.*

verb
to bring back a memory; to sound familiar
*I don't recognize her face, but her voice **rings a bell**.*

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to put the rumors **to rest**
verb

to pin down the details
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to put a stop to; to end; to quell
*If you are afraid of flying, the new technology in these planes should **put** your fears **to rest**.*

verb
to define firmly; to figure out
*The wedding is supposed to be this summer but they haven't **pinned down** the date yet.*

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to field questions
verb

to count as
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to answer questions from a group of people
*After his speech, he **fielded questions** from the audience.*

verb
to be considered; to qualify as
*Astronomy 101 **counts as** a science course for the school's distribution requirement.*

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to count on
verb

to keep a threat **at bay**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to rely on; to depend on
*We need to be home early because Mom is **counting on** us to help her with dinner.*

verb
to make (something) stay away; to ward off
*I've been **keeping** the flu **at bay** by resting and drinking lots of orange juice.*
*The moat around the castle was designed to **hold** invaders at **bay**.*

Copyrighted material

to figure out
verb

to cut back on long-distance phone calls
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to determine or conclude
*The mechanic **figured out** that the problems were being caused by a leak in my car's fuel line.*

verb
to use or do less of (something)
*His doctor told him that he should **cut back on** sugar.*

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to cut off
verb

to cut to the chase
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
1. to interrupt; 2. to stop or discontinue
*She rudely **cut** him **off** in the middle of his story.*
*The storm **cut off** the city's supply of electricity.*

verb
to get directly to the point
*He started describing all of the different features, but we were in a hurry so we asked him to **cut to the chase**.*

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to come around
verb

to come down to
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to agree to something eventually
My father didn't like the idea of me going to college so far away from home, but I'm sure he'll ***come around****.*

verb
to have as an essential point; to be dependent upon
There are all sorts of fad diets around, but healthy weight loss ***comes down to*** *two factors: eating well and exercising regularly.*

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to come along
verb

to bear fruit
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
1. to accompany; 2. to progress
*He invited a friend to **come along**.*
*There were a lot of construction problems at first, but the new house is finally **coming along**.*

verb
to produce results; to be successful
*After twenty years of research, our effort to cure the disease is finally **bearing fruit**.*

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to take its toll
verb

to put off a meeting
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to have a negative effect
*The drought **took its toll** on the crops, and the harvest was much smaller than usual.*
*She looks exhausted. All of those late nights of studying are finally **taking their toll**.*

verb
to postpone
*Our teacher **put** the test **off** until next week.*

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to pass up an opportunity
verb

to put one's finger on a piece of information
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to decline; to fail to take advantage of
*She **passed up** a scholarship at a prestigious university because the school didn't have a good soccer team.*

verb
to identify; to pinpoint
*There must be something missing but I can't **put my finger on** what it is.*

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to turn a blind eye to a problem
verb

to take note of the changes
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to ignore; to overlook
The superintendent accused local schools of ***turning a blind eye*** *to plagiarism and cheating.*

verb
to notice; to observe
He didn't immediately ***take note of*** *her new haircut.*

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to fall into place
verb

to fall out with someone
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to turn out as hoped for
*We were afraid that we would never finish planning our wedding, but everything seems to be **falling into place**.*

verb
to have a serious disagreement
*They **fell out with** each other years ago over who would run the family business.*
*Also as a noun: to have a **falling-out** with someone.*

Copyrighted material

to fall short
verb

to muddle through
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to fail to meet expectations
*Our profits for last year **fell short**.*

verb
to find a way in spite of difficulty or disorganization; to manage
*I didn't know anything about how to direct a play, but I **muddled through**.*

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to bring someone **up to date**
verb

to put a project **on hold**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to give (someone) the latest information
Since you have been absent, talk to me after class and I will ***bring*** *you* ***up to date****.*

verb
to stop (something) temporarily; to suspend
We are ***putting*** *the renovation* ***on hold*** *until next summer.*

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to rule out a possibility
verb

to play down an achievement
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to exclude (something) as a possible option or explanation
*We haven't decided where to spend our honeymoon yet, but we have **ruled out** going on a cruise.*
*The doctor told her that tests had **ruled out** cancer as the cause of her symptoms.*

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to play it safe
verb

to play with fire
verb

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verb
to avoid taking risks
*They **played it safe** and allowed two hours for the drive to the airport.*

verb
to do something dangerous or risky
*We warned the diplomat that he was **playing with fire** by getting involved in local politics.*

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to keep something **in mind**
verb

to bargain for
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to remember and account for (something)
While writing your essay, ***keep in mind*** *that you will get a higher grade if it has a clear argument.*

verb
to expect or be prepared for
The vacationers got more rain than they had ***bargained for*** *when monsoon season hit a few weeks early.*

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to deal with a problem
verb

to take over the company
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to handle or control
*They are finding new ways of **dealing with** the rising cost of college tuition.*

verb
to take control of
*He is difficult to work because he usually tries to **take over** the most interesting projects.*

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to run out of provisions
verb

to take on someone or something
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to use up (a supply of something)
*I couldn't make cookies because I **ran out** of sugar.*

verb
1. to hire (an employee); 2. to confront; to fight against
*They decided to **take** him **on** as a research assistant.*
*The environmental group is **taking on** a big corporation it accuses of polluting the lake.*

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to beat around the bush
verb

to put down roots
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to avoid talking directly about something
*The community meeting was frustrating, because the mayor kept **beating around the bush** instead of addressing the important issues facing our community.*

verb
to settle down; to establish a permanent residence
*After years of traveling, he is finally **putting down roots** by buying a house in his hometown.*

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to put up with something unpleasant
verb

to take part
verb

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verb
to endure or tolerate
*Rather than disciplining students who are late for class, she **puts up with** their behavior.*

verb
to participate
*Fifty nations **took part** in the conference at which the Charter of the United Nations was drafted in 1945.*

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to take sides
verb

to talk someone **into doing** something
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to align oneself with one of the sides in a dispute
*Parents should avoid **taking sides** when their children argue.*

verb
to convince (someone) to do something
*He didn't want to join the team, but they **talked** him **into** it.*

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verb
to do things in the wrong order
Critics say that buying furniture for the new library before the architect has been chosen is ***putting the cart before the horse****.*

verb
to decide; to make a decision
He got into three different colleges, so now he is trying to ***make up his mind*** *about which one to attend.*

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verb
to bear the consequences of a mistake or misdeed
*The school principal made the whole class **pay the price** for graffiti made by one student.*

verb
to try; to make an attempt
*I've never baked a pie before, but I'm **taking a stab at** it this weekend.*
*They asked him to **make a stab at** creating a web page.*

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to part with a possession
verb

to take something **with a grain of salt**
verb

Copyrighted material

verb
to give (something) up
Even when he went to college, he refused ***to part with*** *his teddy bear.*

verb
to be skeptical about (something)
Since he has strong views on this subject, so I ***took*** *his report* ***with a grain of salt****.*

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adjective
competent at one's profession
*Any coach **worth his salt** would have taught you how to stretch your muscles after practice.*

adjective
unprepared
*She did well for most of the interview, but she was caught **off guard** by the last question.*

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blue collar
adjective

white collar
adjective

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run of the mill
adjective

on the tip of one's tongue
adjective

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adjective
unexceptional; ordinary
Despite all of the attention he has gotten in the press, I think he is really just a ***run-of-the-mill*** *portrait painter.*

adjective
on the verge of being recalled
I can't quite remember his name, but it's ***on the tip of my tongue****.*

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beside the point
adjective

to the point
adjective

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adjective
irrelevant; unimportant
The real issue in the renovation is that we need more space; the color of the carpet is ***beside the point****.*
See *to the point.*

adjective
directly related to the topic at hand; relevant
The testimony of the star witness in the case was concise and ***to the point****.*
See *beside the point*

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at a loss for words
adjective

neither here nor there
adjective

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down to earth
adjective

down and out
adjective

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adjective
reasonable and practical; realistic
*She seems remarkably **down to earth** for the daughter of a wealthy celebrity.*

adjective
very poor; destitute
*A decade ago he was a **down-and-out** alcoholic, but today he owns his own business and has been sober for 8 years.*

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in check
adjective

beside oneself
adjective

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adjective
under control
Now that our rent is higher, we will have to keep our spending ***in check****.*

adjective
extremely agitated or upset; distraught
He came home three hours late and his mother was ***beside herself*** *with worry.*

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full-fledged
adjective

a **no-win** predicament
adjective

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adjective
complete; mature; fully developed
*Her hobby of baking cookies has become a **full-fledged** business, with stores all over the city.*

adjective
having no possibility of a positive outcome
*It was a **no-win** situation: we either had to pay the fine or pay a lawyer to fight it.*
See win-win.

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a **win-win** situation
adjective

in charge of
adjective

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on the right track
adjective

on the wrong track
adjective

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red-handed
adjective

‘FYI’ is **short for** ‘for your information’.
adjective

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adjective
in the act of committing a crime
*They caught the thief **red-handed**, with the stolen jewelry in his pockets.*

adjective
used as an abbreviation or shortened form of
*Did you know that the word 'pram' is **short for** 'perambulator'?*

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wrapped up in something
adjective

up in the air
adjective

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adjective
scarce; insufficiently available; running out
*We have plenty of food left, but water is **in short supply**.*

adjective
relaxed; laid-back; restrained
*We are having a party but it won't be anything big, just a **low-key** gathering of friends.*

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feeling **up to** it
adjective

in the pipeline
adjective

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adjective
ready for or able to do something
*It is a very steep mountain; are you sure you're **up to** the hike?*

adjective
on the way; being developed
*She published two books last year and she already has another one **in the pipeline**.*

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on the same page
adjective

in touch with someone
adjective

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at a premium
adjective

in the wings
adjective

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adjective
particularly valuable; especially in demand
In today's job market, ***computer skills*** *are at a premium.*

adjective
ready to act or be used at any time
Newspaper columnists often keep one idea ***in the wings*** *in case of writer's block.*
There were many people waiting ***in the wings*** *to take over when she retired.*
[a reference to the *wings* of a theater, where actors wait to go on stage]

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adjective
being planned or produced; in process
*A sequel to that movie is **in the works**.*

adjective
in accordance with; consistent with
*The themes of her most recent novel are **in line** with her previous work.*

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adjective
completely under the control of; powerless against; totally dependent upon
*Medieval peasants were often **at the mercy of** their local overlord.*
*The small ship was **at the mercy of** the storm.*

adjective
doing everything necessary to accomplish (something); in control of
*I offered her help with the decorations for the dance, but she said she was **on top of it**.*

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time-honored
adjective

on the table
adjective

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adjective
traditional; long-standing
*Serving turkey with cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving is a **time-honored** custom in the United States.*

adjective
up for discussion; possible as an option
*We haven't made a final decision yet, so all of the proposals are still **on the table**.*

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adjective
not talkative; reticent
*My grandmother is a woman **of few words**, but when she says something it is usually very insightful.*

adjective
impossible; inconceivable; not worth considering
*Because of the recent snowstorm, driving over the mountain was **out of the question**.*

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worse for wear
adjective

thin-skinned
adjective

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adjective
showing signs of age or use
This sofa was beautiful when it was new, but it is getting a bit ***worse for wear****.*

adjective
extremely sensitive; easily upset
When students are too ***thin-skinned****, it can be difficult to give them feedback on their work.*
The opposite is *thick-skinned.*

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light years ahead
adjective

out of hand
adjective

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a grass-roots effort
adjective

fine tuning
adjective

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adjective
based on the efforts of ordinary people
Our new city councilwoman didn't get a lot of support from powerful politicians, but she had a strong ***grass-roots*** *campaign.*
Also as a noun: *support from the* ***grass roots****.*

noun
minor adjustments needed to perfect something
The car is running now, but we have to do some ***fine tuning*** *to make it ready to drive on the road.*
Also as a verb: *We need to* ***fine-tune*** *our performance.*

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adjective
very simple
Since he had studied so hard, he thought the exam was ***easy as pie****.*

adjective
unique; unusual
The company knew they'd found ***one in a million*** *when they hired her for the job.*

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adjective
new; untested
*He doesn't know yet how his company's e-mail system works, because he's only been here one day and is still **wet behind the ears**.*

adjective
inexperienced; new
*Her first interview with the mayor went too long, because she was still **green** and didn't know which questions to ask.*

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foregone conclusion
noun

odds and ends
noun

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level playing field
noun

mixed emotions
noun

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the powers that be
noun

the light at the end of the tunnel
noun

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noun
a possession that is useless or unwanted, and difficult to get rid of
The painting is valuable, but no one wants a picture of a slaughterhouse, so it's really a ***white elephant****.*

noun
a person who is currently in a position of authority, but whose successor has already been chosen
When a sitting president loses the election for a second term in November, he becomes a ***lame duck*** *until the new president is inaugurated the following January.*
Now that our company's CEO is a ***lame duck****, people doubt that she will be able to accomplish much before she retires.*

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noun
a new burst of energy or strength to continue a difficult effort
In the last week before the play opened, the actors got their ***second wind*** *and rehearsed long hours to ensure that it was a success.*
[originally used to describe the sudden ability to breathe more easily which some people feel after exercising for a long time]

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white lie
noun

salt of the earth
noun

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noun
a lie considered to be harmless, often told out of politeness
*I told her she looked nice, but it was a **white lie**; her dress was really ugly.*

noun
a person who is decent, honest, kind, and unpretentious
*Her parents are very nice people, **the salt of the earth**.*
Often used as an adjective: ***salt-of-the-earth** people.*

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yellow journalism
noun

the lesser of two evils
noun

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noun
journalism that is sensationalist and biased
That newspaper will print anything to sell papers – it's all gossip and ***yellow journalism****.*
Also *yellow press*.

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red tape
noun

small talk
noun

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noun
excessive regulations and bureaucracy
*We had to deal with a lot of **red tape** to get the proper visa to travel here.*
[From the reddish-colored tape or ribbon that was once used to tie together bundles of legal documents]

noun
polite conversation on unimportant topics; chat
*He made **small talk** with all of the guests at the party.*

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noun
a small but easily recognized part of a much larger problem or issue
*The corruption scandals reported in the news are only the **tip of the iceberg**.*
[a reference to the fact that the biggest part of an iceberg is hidden underneath the water – only the tip is visible]

noun
no extra time, meaning it is necessary to do something right away
*There is **no time to lose**, so let's get to work.*

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double-edged sword
noun

sticking point
noun

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zero tolerance
noun

mint condition
noun

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noun
a policy of punishing even minor offenses
*The school has instituted policy of **zero tolerance** for dress code violations; last week, a student got detention for forgetting to wear a tie.*
Also as an adjective: *a **zero-tolerance** approach to law enforcement.*

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the upper hand
noun

bad blood
noun

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noun
the better position in a situation; the advantage
When the other team's best player was injured, we gained the ***upper hand****.*

noun
hostility due to past events; ill will; antagonism; hatred
There has been ***bad blood*** *between them ever since the lawsuit ten years ago.*

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game plan
noun

the cutting edge
noun

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gray area
noun

face value
noun

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noun
a complete reversal; a U-turn
*After ten years of supporting the same party he did an **about face** and started voting for the opposition.*

noun
the qualities required to accomplish something
*Your daughter has **what it takes** to be a professional musician.*

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a **vicious circle**
noun

the **eleventh hour**
noun

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noun
an unpleasant fact that is difficult to accept
*The knee injury that ended his tennis career was a **bitter pill**, but he became a successful coach.*

noun
a new or unfamiliar situation
*Advances in biotechnology are taking scientists into **uncharted waters** requiring new ethical guidelines.*
[*uncharted* means 'unmapped or unexplored']

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noun
a general or approximate guideline
*When cooking rice, a good **rule of thumb** is to use two parts water to one part rice.*

noun
negative feelings of resentment or bitterness
*They are no longer in business together, but they are still friends and there are no **hard feelings** about the end of their partnership.*

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salad days
noun

a labor of love
noun

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noun
the days of one's youth, regarded either as a time of inexperience or as a peak or heyday
*We recalled the rash decisions of our **salad days**.*
*His performance has declined since his **salad days**.*
[from Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra: my **salad days**, when I was green in judgment*]

noun
a project undertaken purely out of pleasure or interest
*He paints portraits for money, but his still-life paintings are a **labor of love**.*

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olive branch
noun

seeing **the big picture**
noun

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ill-gotten gains
noun

quantum leap
noun

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noun
profits or benefits acquired unfairly or illegally
*Robin Hood is both a thief and a hero, because he shares his **ill-gotten gains** with the poor.*

noun
a sudden and significant improvement or advance
*In the past decade there has been a **quantum leap** in our scientific understanding of human genetics.*
[from Physics, where a *quantum leap* (also ***quantum jump***) is the abrupt shift of an electron within an atom from one energy state to another]

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ivory tower
noun

a change of pace
noun

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noun
a place that is insulated from the concerns of the real world
To really understand social issues, he needs to get away from the ***ivory tower*** *of university life.*

noun
a change from what is usual or ordinary
She usually drinks coffee every morning but today she's having tea for ***a change of pace****.*

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noun
the most important consideration or conclusion; the main point
We talked about a lot of techniques for time management, but ***the bottom line*** *is that we just need to get more done.*
[from the use of *the bottom line* in accounting, where it refers to the final total of a balance sheet]

adverb
for all; in every category
The new budget makes cutbacks in government services ***across the board****, from highways to education.*

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at odds with established theory
adverb

speaking **off the cuff**
adverb

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adverb
in contradiction to; in disagreement or conflicting with
*His account of events is **at odds with** the story published in the newspaper.*

adverb
without any preparation
*Everyone was impressed when he gave a fantastic speech **off the cuff**.*

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now and then
adverb

hand in hand
adverb

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adverb
occasionally
He doesn't exercise much, but he does go biking ***now and then****.*

adverb
1. while holding hands; 2. in close association; jointly
Couples walked down the street ***hand in hand****.*
Low unemployment often goes ***hand in hand*** *with inflation.*

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He was left **in the dark**
adverb

down the road
adverb

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adverb
without important information; uninformed
*She was upset that they had kept her **in the dark** about their plan to sell the house.*

adverb
in the future
*This may seem like a risky investment now, but I am confident that it will pay **down the road**.*

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prepared **ahead of time**
adverb

at stake
adverb

Copyrighted material

adverb
in advance; beforehand
*He practiced an acceptance speech **ahead of time** just in case he won the prize.*

adverb
at risk; in question
*The national championship is **at stake** in this game.*

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in the wake of
adverb

through thick and thin
adverb

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adverb
as a consequence of; in the aftermath of
In the wake of *the recent earthquake we decided to redesign the building for stability.*

adverb
through good times and bad times; in all circumstances
Married couples vow to support each other ***through thick and thin****.*

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adverb
worth mentioning
*He doesn't have any savings **to speak of**; he spends all of his money on entertainment.*

adverb
certainly; absolutely; unquestionably
*It was **without a doubt** the worst book I have ever read.*

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on top of everything else
adverb

out of the blue
adverb

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adverb
in addition to; besides
On top of *all of his other accomplishments, he is now captain of the hockey team.*

adverb
without any warning; unexpectedly; out of nowhere
I hadn't seen him in months, but he called me ***out of the blue*** *last week and invited me to dinner.*

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adverb
based on the information (a person) has; to the best of (a person's) knowledge
*She isn't here yet, but **as far as** I **know** she is still planning to come.*

adverb
in one's thoughts; preoccupying one
*I have a lot **on my mind** right now.*
*That incident has been **on his mind** lately.*

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behind closed doors
adverb

on behalf of someone
adverb

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adverb
in secret; out of public view
The government eventually signed the treaty, but we may never know what bargains were made ***behind closed doors*** *to make it happen.*

adverb
as a representative of someone; in the interest of someone
He wrote a letter ***on behalf of*** *his mother, asking the company to give her a refund.*

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adverb
nevertheless
Some say that printed books are becoming obsolete; ***be that as it may****, publishing remains a dynamic and prosperous business.*

adverb
without proper permission or disclosure; illegally
He was getting paid ***under the table*** *to avoid taxes.*
[See *above board*]

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we experienced it **at first hand**
adverb

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adverb
in a short summary; very briefly
This book covers the major points of the topic ***in a nutshell****.*

adverb
in the future; eventually
This may seem like a good policy now, but it could cause major problems ***down the line****.*

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to a fault
adverb

by word of mouth
adverb

Copyrighted material

adverb
excessively; so much that it causes problems
*She is careful **to a fault**; it takes her forever to finish anything.*

adverb
through informal conversation
*They didn't have enough money to advertise in the newspaper, but they got a lot of publicity **by word of mouth**.*
Also as an adjective: ***word-of-mouth** advertising.*

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behind someone's **back**
adverb

behind the scenes
adverb

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all of a sudden
adverb

beyond the shadow of a doubt
adverb

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adverb
without any warning; instantly
*We were walking in the park when **all of the sudden** the lights went out.*

adverb
without any doubt at all; for certain
*We now know **beyond a shadow of a doubt** that the Vikings reached North America centuries before Columbus.*

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in the balance
adverb

in over one's head
adverb

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adverb
at stake; at risk
*Applying to college is very stressful; sometimes it feels like your entire future is **in the balance**.*

adverb
in a situation for which one is not qualified or prepared
*He got **in over his head** when he agreed to do all of the paperwork for the project.*

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by the book
adverb

as far as someone **is concerned**
adverb

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in no time
adverb

by virtue of
adverb

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for the time being
adverb

by all means
adverb

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adverb
absolutely not; not at all
*She is a talented singer but **by no means** the best in the choir.*
See by all means.

adverb
as ordinarily or habitually happens; like always
*I planned to study before class today, but **as usual** I overslept.*

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back to square one
adverb

in view of
adverb

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in the long run
adverb

by the way
adverb

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adverb
after a long time; in the end; eventually
*It may seem hard to save money for retirement now, but **in the long run** you will be very glad that you did.*

adverb
incidentally
*I read that book you lent me. **By the way**, did you know the author lives near here?*

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adverb
in general; mostly
Her grades this year were good ***for the most part****.*

adverb
up to the present time; as of now
They will be hiring a new secretary, but ***as yet*** *they have not done so.*

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adverb
considering; because of; taking into account
*She was given a lighter punishment **in light of** the fact that this was the first time she had broken the rules.*

adverb
in addition; beyond what is needed
*The recipe called for four cloves of garlic, but I added two more **for good measure**.*

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against all odds
adverb

by hand
adverb

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adverb
despite it being very unlikely; incredibly, unexpectedly
***Against all odds**, she won her match against the five-time state champion.*
*He recovered from the operation and, **against the odds**, was able to walk again.*

adverb
without using a machine
*Delicate fabrics like cashmere should be washed **by hand**.*

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adverb
based on the appearance of something; apparently
From the looks of *the orientation assembly, there must be fewer students at school this year.*
The bake sale is raising a lot of money this year, ***by the looks of it****.*

adverb
1. immediately; 2. in an awkward position where one is forced to make a difficult decision right away
She didn't expect to get an answer for several weeks, but the accepted her application ***on the spot****.*
He put me ***on the spot*** *by proposing marriage in front of his whole family.*

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with one voice
adverb

warts and all
adverb

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adverb
unanimously; in unison
The company's employees opposed the policy ***with one voice****.*

adverb
including a person's faults as well as his or her positive qualities
Parents love their children unconditionally, ***warts and all****.*

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on the loose
adverb

under the weather
adverb

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In the affirmative
adverb

In the negative
adverb

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on the spur of the moment
adverb

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